

Evangelism in Eastern Europe

Matthew 9:35–38, Jesus’s 7-Step Plan for Evangelism.

Verse 35a, “Jesus went” - the WHAT of evangelism.

- We go!
- Don’t expect the lost to come to us.

Verse 35b, “throughout all the cities and villages” – the WHERE of evangelism.

- ALL the towns and villages.
- Wherever there are lost people!

Verse 35c, “teaching ... preaching ... caring for [healing]” – the HOW of evangelism.

- By caring for people.
- Mind, soul, and body (cf. Gal 2:10).

Verse 36b, “he had compassion for them” – the WHY of evangelism.

- We just love people!
- We care that they are hurting and helpless (v36c).

Verse 37, “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” – the NEED of evangelism.

- Much work needs to be done.
- Too few workers currently doing the work (note the μέν ... δέ).

Verse 38a, “therefore plead [earnestly pray] the Lord of harvest” – the MEANS of evangelism.

- Prayer! Strong prayer: “to ask for something pleadingly” (BDAG), “expresses urgency” (Quarles).
- The only imperative in this paragraph!

Verse 38b, “to send workers into his harvest” – the WORKERS of evangelism.

- Send is a strong word (not just βάλλω but ἐκβάλλω).
- Not just send anyone, but workers.

[Cf. Black’s “Jesus’ Model for Missions.”]

Paul’s Strategy in Evangelism

Acts 17:2, Luke identifies Paul’s M.O., especially when there was a synagogue. He had a plan everywhere.

Acts 16:6–10, Paul planned, as a part of his strategy, to go to Asia (Ephesus), but was forced to take a European detour for a couple years.

Acts 18:18–21, Paul finally had the chance to go to Ephesus to scout it out, and there was indeed a great opportunity there; “if God wills” (cf. Acts 16:6 where God was not willing) he would be back ASAP.

Acts 19:1, Paul finally made it back to Ephesus. What would happen? Would his strategy prove effective?

- Acts 19:2–7, twelve men were baptized into Christ—immediate success.
- Acts 18:8, for three months he reasoned and persuaded in the synagogue.
- Acts 18:9–10, ALL the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, Jews and Greeks! His strategy and patience paid off!

What exactly happened? What exactly was Paul’s strategy?

- Paul went to a major hub, that is, a large city with connections to other surrounding towns.
- He concentrated on teaching and converting people within that city knowing some of them would have connections to the surrounding towns and villages.
- People who were converted did just that—they went to their hometowns, the surrounding towns and villages and taught the people in those towns and villages (presumably with Paul’s training and approval, cf. 2 Tim 2:1–2).
- The result of this can be seen especially in Colossians where we learn of at least three churches being started not by Paul directly but by those he taught:
 - o Colossians 1:3–4, 9ff, Paul had heard of their faith.
 - o Colossians 1:5b–7, Epaphras, not Paul, had taught them the word of truth, the gospel.
 - o Colossians 2:1, the saints in Colossae and Laodicea (and Hierapolis, RST) had not seen Paul.
 - o Colossians 4:12–17, churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.
 - o Cf. Ephesians, some manuscripts do not have “in Ephesus” (1:1) and from the content of the letter it seems that Paul had not met them but had only heard of their faith (Eph 1:15), and the recipients of the letter seem to not know Paul personally (Eph 3:2; cf. 4:21). These last two points don’t make sense if Paul spent over two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). It is possible, therefore, that our book of Ephesians was meant as a circular letter for the churches of Asia, which would further indicate the effect of Paul’s strategy of teaching in the hub of Ephesus.

Applications to (Eastern) Europe

The WHERE:

- We’re focusing on Europe, especially Eastern Europe, and right now especially Moldova, Lithuania (possibly Latvia and Estonia), Ukraine, and Romania (Nord-Est / northeastern, western part of the old state of Moldavia and southern Bukovina, including Iași, Bacău, Botoșani, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui).

- But the kingdom of God, that is, the rule and reign of God in the hearts of people is needed everywhere in the world (including in the USA).

The NEED:

- There are tens of millions of people in these places who have NEVER heard the gospel in its simplicity.
- There are several places where churches once existed but they have died out primarily because of a lack of workers.
- Story of Kestutis saying that in 2022 we were the first Bible teachers to visit Lithuania since 2008 (14 years without any workers in Lithuania). Story of David Thomley in Italy for more than 40 years.
- Paul's Letters are replete with mention of Paul either sending workers somewhere or leaving workers somewhere over a several-year period.

What can you do?

The PRAYER:

- Pray! Pray! Pray! Plead with God to send workers into these places (and throughout the world).
- If you aren't able to travel yourself, work with those who are by praying for them. Example of our family prayer.
- Story of those who prayed for the Cold War to come to an end, along with their preparation.

The WORKERS

- Workers not needed:
 - o We cannot bring personal differences to foreign work. Story of work in a particular country that is now split because of personality differences among the workers. Story of differences between workers resulting in doors being padlocked to prevent fellow brethren from assembling.
 - o We cannot bring our scruples to foreign work. If you don't know what your scruples are, it may not be a good idea for you to get involved in foreign work. Consider Paul's strong language against those who attempted to bind their scruples on others: Gal 1:6-9; 5:12.
 - o Story of brother who said there were only three faithful churches in the world (scruple over LS). Story of sister who said her local church was the only faithful church in her area of the state, despite there being dozens of faithful churches throughout the state (scrupulous!).
 - o First-time workers going solo. Go with someone experienced. Learn the ropes.
- Workers needed:
 - o We need workers who are willing to work and not go on vacation.

- Story of brother who skipped a Bible study to visit a museum. Story of a family asked to leave a country because of spending so much time traveling and vacationing.
- We need workers who are filled with compassion and love and who are willing to become all things to all people so that by all means we might save some (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19–23).
- We need workers who are patient and longsuffering with those they are working with and with themselves. In Eastern Europe, the Christians and churches do not have the foundation we have in the States. They will have a LOT of misunderstandings about Scriptures. They will have wrong beliefs and practices. Do not plan to correct everything immediately.
- Story of courses in Sierra Leone with 60+ denominational pastors; it took at least six times of them hearing something before they even recognized that I was saying something different than what they believed; they had so many wrong beliefs and misunderstandings that it was physically impossible to address them all; I would finish our seven hours of classes and often just laugh, not at them, but laughing with God but because of how impossible it was to address everything; I was just praying that I was addressing the most important things.
- We need workers who recognize they still have room to grow and things to learn. Working overseas changes a person. It changes perspective. Getting out of the echo chamber is always good. When approached with humility and open-mindedness, it is a learning experience.

The OTHER:

- If possible, learn the language, at least to be conversational.
- Expect things to be lost in translation. Story of bus in Czech Republic.
- Expect the unexpected. Story of first trip to Moldova. Story of train and minibus in Czech Republic.
- Expect cultural differences. Story of dropping Bible on table in Moldova. Story of IST.

The STRATEGY

- In places where there are already faithful brethren, work with them, getting their permission, utilizing them in the work. They know their culture and people best. They have contacts. Story of PhD's in Chişinău and Olympic runners in Transnistria.
- In places where there were faithful brethren but they have stopped meeting, make attempts to restore them to faithfulness and reestablish the church in that place (Hamilton, Peters NE Rom).
- In places where there are no faithful brethren, follow Paul's strategy. To find contacts do what Paul did, go where the people are interested in talking. Story of brother Kingry going to English corners in China (and giving a lecture in this room in 1998, running into Abraham who already knew the gospel and brother Kingry not knowing how, and my Granddad leaning over to me to let me know he converted Abraham back in 1973 or 1974). Story of lecturing in universities; conversion of atheist interpreter that led to the work in Moldova; lecturing on topics that are not directly "proselytizing."

- In places where the people have never seen a white person (or where being white or American will be a distraction), it is best to train native people to take the gospel to their fellow countryfolk. Story of Indians thinking I had special powers in prayer and in naming their babies, and of being worshiped in India. (Actually, training native people to do the work in their country is best in all places and should be the main part of a long-term strategy!)
- We stand on the shoulders of giants. When the Cold War ended brethren were effective in converting hundreds, maybe thousands of people in Eastern Europe by having many people going at different times so that there was continuity and constancy. They collaborated and cooperated, avoiding being islands or silos. These brethren, following Paul, went to the bigger cities first and worked from there.

An IDEA:

- Based on the information above, here is an idea we propose:
- Four couples per country,
- Who are willing to make a 6- to 13-week commitment.
- To provide continuity and constancy,
- As they collaborate and cooperate (possibly including with couples in other countries, too).

About John Gentry

I was born (1979) and raised in West TN (Huntingdon). My wife Stacy (née Gideon) and I met at Florida College (class of 1999) and have been married 25 years. We have six children (12 to 22), three of whom are adopted from Wenzhou, China. Since 2002 we've been involved in working with churches of Christ in local ministry in the USA and in missionary work primarily in Eastern Europe (Moldova, Lithuania, Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine), though also in Sierra Leone and India. We have lived in IN, KY, IN, Moldova, TN, and are now back in IN (since July 2021).

Besides living in Moldova (January 2012 – May 2014), we have been making regular trips to Moldova (and other parts of Eastern Europe) since 2006. We now make two to three trips each year, focusing on Europe, especially Eastern Europe, and right now especially Moldova, Lithuania (possibly Latvia and Estonia), Ukraine, and Romania (Nord-Est / northeastern: Iași, Bacău, Botoșani, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui). We have taken around 25 people with us on our trips to Eastern Europe. We have been teaching weekly, sometimes twice-weekly, classes via video conference since 2007 with participants (Christians and non-Christians) from several Eastern European countries (usually 25 to 45 participants). Stacy also teaches a monthly ladies' class with several ladies from Eastern Europe.

In addition to the work just mentioned, I have taught over 400 classes via video (Skype and Zoom) in India and Sierra Leone focusing on Introduction to New Testament Christianity and preacher training. I also had a radio program that aired throughout Sierra Leone in 2008 and 2009.

God willing, we plan to continue focusing on Eastern Europe. As our children get older (and our parents' health permitting), we plan to increase the number of trips and time spent in Eastern European countries working with existing brethren to strengthen and encourage them and seeking those who are seeking Jesus.

As mentioned above, we believe the ideal situation would be for there to be four couples per country that dedicated themselves to traveling to their respective country one time a year for a six- to 13-week trip, collaborating and cooperating with the other couples to provide continuity and constancy.

If you are interested in learning more about these opportunities, or how you can pray for or financially support these opportunities, please reach out to us anytime.

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